

The Day My Emotions Joined Me in Prayer

When I entered ministry at the age of twenty-five, I determined to be the most Methodist Baptist any methodical young minister could be. I made elaborate plans for each day's activities: a certain time to rise and an allotted time for prayer, Bible study, visiting, letter writing, and so on.

Alas, it seemed as though "the stars in their courses" fought against my well-meaning methodicalness. As I became enmeshed in a busy pastorate, my prayer times and Bible study became less regular. When I did pray, my attempts seemed devoid of any power or reality.

That unhappy state continued much too long, but eventually a crisis arose. I was still struggling to maintain some semblance of a system, and one morning the time came to spend an hour in prayer. On my desk, however, lay a pile of unanswered letters. A voice within me seemed to say, Your first duty is not prayer but the answering of those letters. You have no right to neglect such a plain duty.

I vacillated. Just then a velvety voice reasoned, Sid, why keep flogging yourself? Will you never learn? God needs busy, active Martha as well as quiet, contemplative Mary; the practical as well as the spiritual. Isn't God blessing your ministry enough to show his approval? You have to face it: You, Sid, are not one of the spiritual sort!

That last remark hurt like a dagger. Deep down, I knew there could be no vital experience of God, no continuing power in ministry, without regular prayer.

That morning I took a penetrating look into my inner life. I found, sure enough, a part of me did not want to pray—my emotions. But on deeper scrutiny, I discovered another part which did want to pray—my will. Yes, the will to pray was there, but the emotions were all facing the other way; and they were artfully using those letters on my desk as a clever cover-up.

So I stood face to face with my will. "Will," I asked, "are you ready for an hour of prayer?"

"I'm quite ready if you are," answered Will. So Will and I linked arms and turned to go for our time of prayer.

At once all the emotions began pulling the other way and protesting, "We're not coming! We're not coming!"

I saw Will stagger a bit, so I asked, "Can you stick with it?"

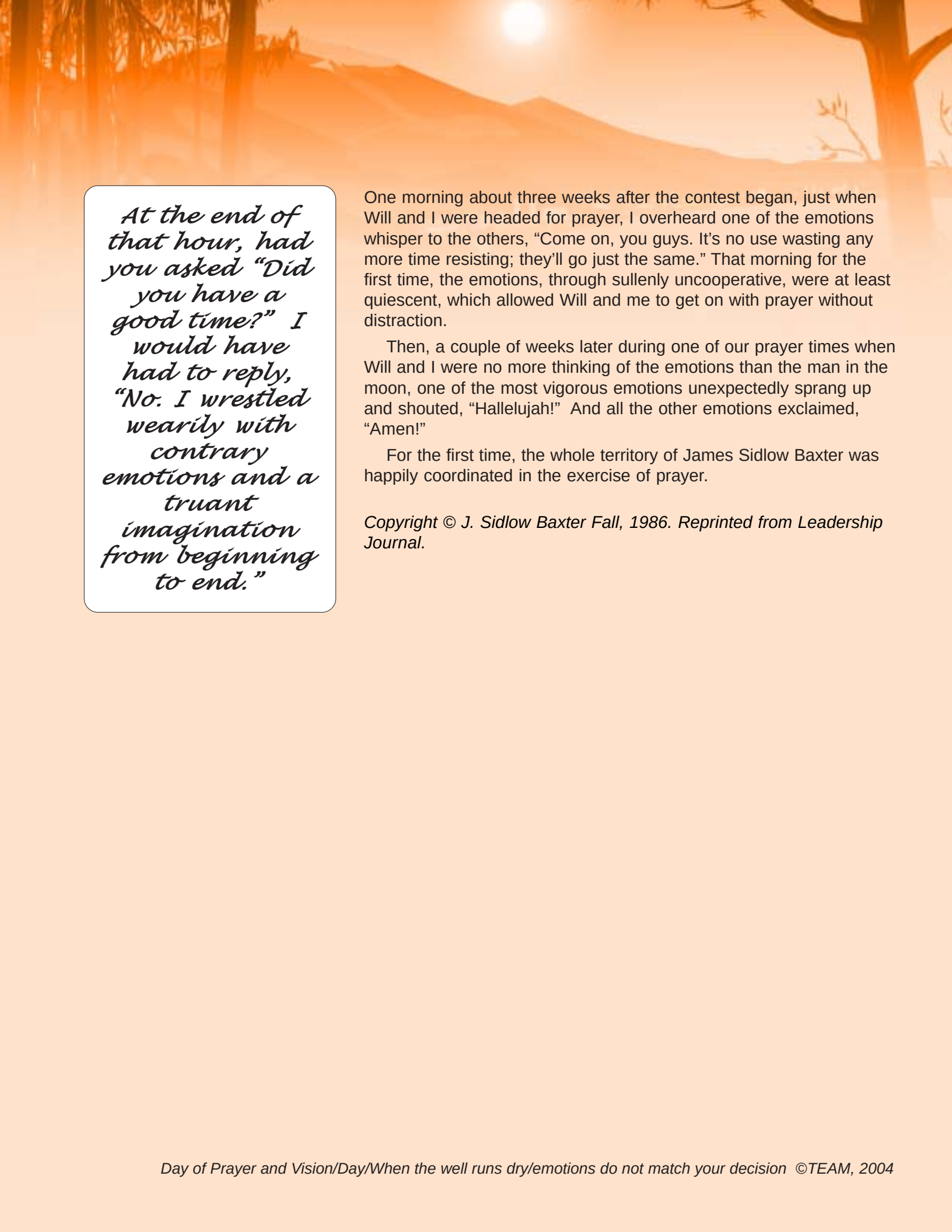
"Yes, if you can." Then I got down to payer, dragging those wriggling, obstreperous emotions with us.

It was a struggle. At one point in the middle of an earnest intercession, I found one of those traitorous emotions had snared my imagination and run off to the golf course. It was all I could do to drag the wicked rascal back. A bit later I found another of the emotions had sneaked away with some unguarded thoughts and was preaching a sermon I had not yet finished!

At the end of that hour, had you asked "Did you have a good time?" I would have had to reply, "No. I wrestled wearily with contrary emotions and a truant imagination from beginning to end." That battle with the emotions continued for two or three weeks, and if you had asked then "Did you enjoy your daily prayer?" I would have to confess, "No, at times it seemed as though the heavens were brass."

Yet something was happening. Will and I demonstrated to the emotions our independence.

I found, sure enough, a part of me did not want to pray—my emotions. But on deeper scrutiny, I discovered another part which did want to pray—my will.



*At the end of
that hour, had
you asked "Did
you have a
good time?" I
would have
had to reply,
"No. I wrestled
wearily with
contrary
emotions and a
truant
imagination
from beginning
to end."*

One morning about three weeks after the contest began, just when Will and I were headed for prayer, I overheard one of the emotions whisper to the others, "Come on, you guys. It's no use wasting any more time resisting; they'll go just the same." That morning for the first time, the emotions, through sullenly uncooperative, were at least quiescent, which allowed Will and me to get on with prayer without distraction.

Then, a couple of weeks later during one of our prayer times when Will and I were no more thinking of the emotions than the man in the moon, one of the most vigorous emotions unexpectedly sprang up and shouted, "Hallelujah!" And all the other emotions exclaimed, "Amen!"

For the first time, the whole territory of James Sidlow Baxter was happily coordinated in the exercise of prayer.

Copyright © J. Sidlow Baxter Fall, 1986. Reprinted from *Leadership Journal*.